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On the Role of the Liaison Interpreter

论联络口译员的角色定位

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## Synopsis

In the literature of interpreting research, there is not yet any in-depth discussion of the role of liaison interpreters. The current thesis is an attempt to explore the nature of the role of the liaison interpreter and to come up with an appropriate description. There are two motivations behind the research: one intrinsic and the other practical. From the point of view of interpreting studies, the author believes such an attempt is valuable as a vehicle for investigating interpreting in an all-round way. From the point of view of interpreting practice, it is important for the liaison interpreter to have a clear recognition of the role he/she plays in the interpreting event, so that his/her behavior therein can be justified and quality interpreting can be assured.

The thesis is divided into three chapters, excluding an introduction and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis, including the impetus behind and the purpose of the thesis. It used to be commonly understood that the interpreter should do nothing but to translate during an interpreting event. However, observing real-life practice of liaison interpreters, one will find that such understanding is not applicable. Therefore, the thesis is devoted to the discussion of the role of the liaison interpreter.

Chapter 2 is a brief review of descriptions and metaphors ever used in a view to explore the role of interpreters as a whole. The descriptions can be divided into three categories, namely helper, conduit model and cultural mediator, hinging upon the distinction between extreme personal involvement, extreme non-involvement and moderate personal involvement. The descriptions are overall studies of the role of all kinds of interpreters and do not reveal the nature of the liaison interpreter's role.

Chapter 3 is a definition of liaison interpreting, which adopts a “multi-parameter” typology. The thesis lays its focus on liaison interpreters, thus it is beneficial to define liaison interpreting and look into the characteristics that differentiate it from other kinds of interpreting events.

Chapter 4 rounds off the investigation of the role of the liaison interpreter by defining him/her as a power figure within the interpreting event, who can have certain control over the communication. After power and control are defined, the chapter proceeds to the dynamic nature of the communication in liaison interpreting, pointing out the possibility and necessity for the liaison interpreter to have power and control. Assuming the role of a power figure, the liaison interpreter exercises his/her control through two major missions, i.e. to influence the substance and the progression of the interpreting event. However, the control by the liaison interpreter is not arbitrary and unlimited. The author suggests that the liaison interpreter, while exercising his/her power and control, shall take into accounts the setting and his/her own competence.

Chapter 5 is a conclusion of the thesis, recapping the important points of the research and suggesting directions for further study as well.

**Key words:** liaison interpreter; power; control

## 摘 要

本论文旨在对联络口译员在口译活动中应该承担的角色和发挥的作用进行定位。本论文的研究意义主要体现在两个层面：从理论意义上讲，鉴于目前在口译研究领域尚未对联络口译员的角色定位进行具体深入的探讨，对联络口译的研究有助于完整口译学研究的范围，推动口译学研究向纵深方向发展；从实践意义上讲，联络口译员也需要对自己在口译活动中的角色和作用有一个清晰的认识，这将有助于指导其在口译活动中的行为策略，也有助于提高口译的质量。

本文共分五章。

第一章为引言，主要阐述了本研究的动机和意图。人们普遍将口译员的工作简单地理解为单纯的语言翻译，但是在现实生活中，联络口译员承担的并不仅仅是语言翻译的工作。这一定位显然是不合理的，因此本文旨在对联络口译员的角色进行分析，从而得出一个较为合理的定位。

第二章回顾了口译研究文献中对口译员的角色问题的探讨和描述。对口译员已有的角色定位主要可分为三类，分别是帮手、传声筒和文化中介者。三者的区别主要在于口译员介入口译活动过程的程度不同，如完全介入、完全不介入及部分介入。这些定位针对的是所有的口译工作者，并未考虑到联络口译的特殊性，因此并不适宜于对联络口译员的角色定位。

第三章对本论文的研究主体即联络口译进行了界定。对于联络口译的定义，本文采用了多参数的方法，从多个方面对联络口译的范围进行界定。本章还对联络口译的特点进行了分析。

第四章为本文的主体部分，提出联络口译员在口译活动中占据十分重要的作用，是口译活动的权力人物，可以对口译的交际过程进行一定程度的控制。本章首先对“权力”和“控制”作了定义，进而分析了联络口译的本质及其动态交际过程的复杂性，指出联络口译员能够并且应当拥有对口译活动进行控制的权力。这种权力主要通过两种途径来实现：一是以多种翻译手段控制交际的内容；一是控制整个交际过程。但同时本文也指出联络口译员所拥有的这种权力并不是不受

限制，可以随心所欲的。译员在行使权力时还应考虑口译活动的背景及自身的能力。

第五章为结论，再次点明本论文的主要观点。

**关键词：** 联络口译员；权力；控制

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Talking of the role of the interpreter, many people will naturally think of the phrase “a man in the middle”. It follows that the “man in the middle” is pivotal to the entire communicative process. In the typical case of three participants, two may be assumed to be monolingual. The interpreter, on the other hand, is required to be bilingual. The two monolingual participants would be unable to communicate with each other without the aid of the interpreter – except through a primitive set of gestures. What should the “man in the middle” do then? Should he be a mere echo, or should he be an advisor or an ally? It is commonly understood that interpreters are to render what others say, and that is all. It is believed that impartiality, neutrality, and fidelity are the basic requirements of interpreters. Some interpreters themselves also try hard to follow closely what the primary parties say. They make every effort to be invisible.

However, it is only theoretically possible for interpreters, especially for liaison interpreters, to remain invisible during the encounters. Most practicing liaison interpreters have learned through experience that they are assigned too many tasks. They do more than change language structures and make cultural adjustments within the language in these encounters. As Franz Pöchhacker (2002:339) points out, “viewed in a broad historical perspective, interpreters often appear as all-round intermediaries carrying out a number of variegated and diffuse functions in addition to their translational task.” At times, they have to stand out as a visible party of the communicative act, since they keep coming across various kinds of dilemmas. The ambiguity of the role of liaison interpreters sometimes makes practitioners at a loss. They do not know what to do when facing some difficult dilemmas. They are afraid of going beyond what the code tells them, i.e. “just translating”. No one really knows

where to draw the line on the involvement of the interpreter. Increasingly, the profession has been subject to conflicting notions of reality.

It is not improper to say that the role of interpreters remains characteristically fluid. That is why Fritsch Rudser (1988) can say, “Interpreters don’t have a problem with ethics, they have a problem with the role,” and have a room full of interpreters applaud (Roy 1993:347). Not surprisingly, the issue of the interpreter’s role was – and still is – a central concern to practitioners and researchers pushing for greater professionalization of interpreting. Therefore, the current author chooses the role of liaison interpreters as her interested topic as well. Understanding the very role of liaison interpreters proves relevant when practitioners try to seek for better performance and to deal with problematic situations. Understanding the role of the interpreter may also aid understanding of interaction between people of different statuses and backgrounds within a single-language community (Anderson 1976:210).

Chapter 2 of this paper is a brief review of descriptions and metaphors ever used in a view to explore the role of interpreters. Chapter 3 proceeds to define liaison interpreting and examines its characteristics. In Chapter 4, the thesis of the paper is put forward, that is, the liaison interpreter is a power figure within the interpreting event, who can have certain control over the interaction. After defining power and control, the current author goes on to scrutinize the possibility and necessity for the liaison interpreter to have power and control in an interpreting event, as well as the missions through which the power and control of the liaison interpreter are maintained. Chapter 5 recaps the important points of the study and suggests directions for further study.

## **Chapter 2 Descriptions of the Role of Interpreters**

People who know more than one language are afforded the opportunity of pursuing interpreting as a career. Interpreter is a role bilingual individuals assume for many reasons, some of which are personal satisfaction and desirable pay. However, the role of the interpreter is by no way as simple as a bilingual. Not all bilinguals or multilinguals are qualified as interpreters. The role of the interpreter is rather complex. What does the role connote? As practicing interpreters and interpreting researchers strive to better understand the elusiveness and complexity of the interpreter's role and endeavor to promote the professionalization of this particular field, there come quite a lot of descriptions of the role of the interpreter. For instance, professional interpreters often describe themselves as people in the middle. Sometimes interpreters are even referred to as an "evil", but a "necessary evil". In the descriptions, many metaphorical words and phrases are used, and terminology from other disciplines is borrowed too. The words and phrases are put forward as academicians and practitioners struggle to adequately characterize the role of interpreters and explain what they do.

### **2.1 Helper**

Interpreting is said to begin after the collapse of the Tower of Babel. Before it was professionalized, people who were bilingual were often invited at ad hoc base to help those who only knew one language and could not converse with the other one or the others who did not share the same language when a talk between the two parties were necessary. The bilingual people can be family members, neighbors or friends.

For example, a relative from the United States comes for a visit. The child of the host family, who knows English, is asked to interpret for the relative during her stay. He

is then cast in the helper role, for he is not only responsible for interpreting tasks, but also has the duty to see to everything.

As Roy (1993:349) states, “In the decades before the 1960s, there was no distinction between a helper and an interpreter. Helpers were free to offer advice, translate messages, and make decisions for one or both sides.” It should be admitted that as the profession is getting to be recognized by more and more people, this type of interpreting, performed only by volunteers, ad hoc bilinguals, friends, and relatives (even children) has reduced, but it occurs occasionally too. Some tend to think that the interpreter is almighty. They expect the interpreter to deal with the language issues as well as to manage all kinds of things. Sometimes, interpreters themselves are willing to assume such a role too.

Helping out in this way, the interpreter seems to be admirable to many, but he or she may run the risk of impairing the power of the person(s) who is/are enjoying the help to the extent to make them feel inferior to the interpreter as if they are not able to take care of their own business without the intervention of the “helper”. The risk is higher especially when the person(s) is/are from a weaker group of the society, like the deaf. Being a helper, the interpreter also runs the risk of taking on his/her shoulder too much burden, which may distract him/her from his/her major task – interpreting. Sometimes, the interpreter as helper works for free. The interpreter gets no pay for his or her effort, thus the interpreting job is rendered as a favor rather than a service. The interpreter does not have the obligation to bring his or her effort to a professional standard. Even if the interpreter performs unprofessionally, the client may still appreciate his/her work. This will greatly hinder the professionalization of interpreting.

Fortunately, practitioners and researchers have come to realize that “helper” should not be a role the interpreter assumes.

## 2.2 Conduit

“Changing expectations of consumers, and the profession’s own need to see itself as rendering professional services, brought about the second description, the conduit model” (Roy 1993:349).

The notion of the conduit model was first put forward by the philosopher Reddy in 1979 (Roy 1993:349). It is a denial of the helper role. While the “helper” role allows the interpreter to get involved in various aspects of the communicative act, the conduit model maintains that the interpreter should extricate himself/herself totally from the interaction. Several metaphors and metaphorical descriptions are adopted to assist the understanding of the notion, like machine, telephone, channel and bridge, etc.

The conduit model expresses the wish of practitioners and researchers to be seen as rendering a professional service while refraining from taking over the decision-making responsibilities for either party involved in an interpreting event (Roy 1993:349). The interpreter is supposed to refrain from getting emotionally or personally involved. He or she is only allowed to perform his or her particular function, that is, to translate.

One portrayal of the interpreter guided by the conduit model is the machine. Machines operate as instructed. If there is no instruction, the machine will not take any action. The machine-like interpreter is essentially a device that takes no part in communicative proceedings other than dispassionately relaying messages between individuals not sharing a common language. He or she is required to reproduce a message from one speaker to another faithfully, accurately, and without emotional or personal bias.

Another frequent metaphor is the telephone. The interpreter is then described as an instrument, which just conveys information and merely technically affects the words, messages, and utterances of the primary parties. Solow (1980:ix), a practitioner and an educator of interpreters, wrote, “the ... interpreter acts as a communication link between people, serving only in that capacity. An analogy is in the use of the telephone – the telephone is a link between two people that does not exert personal influence on either”.

Apart from the “machine” and “telephone” metaphors, an interpreter is also seen as a person in the middle who serves as a channel or bridge through which communication can happen. A channel or bridge serves only as a linkage. The responsibility of the interpreter is restricted to language transfer. He or she should not exert any influence over the communication.

No matter which kind of image is applied, what is inherent behind these metaphors is that the interpreter should be entirely uninvolved. He or she should be duplicating what is said in the originals without any personal engagement. To be specific, interpreters may not introduce topics or change topics, may not ask questions of their own, nor interject their opinion or give advice, and must keep the entire transaction confidential.

Some early versions of interpreting codes stipulate the role of the interpreter as essentially reactive and not proactive, too. For example, the Code published by the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) makes it clear that the aim of interpreting is for the interpreter to open the door, but first across the threshold, setting and executing their own agenda, should be the monolingual parties (Tate and Turner 1997:374). Not coincidentally, the Code of Professional Responsibility for Interpreters also states that interpreters “shall

maintain an impartial attitude during the course of interpreting ...”, “shall strive for professional detachment” and that “verbal and non-verbal displays of personal attitudes, prejudices, emotions or opinions should be avoided at all times.”

In his/her thus idealized role, interpreters should be used to not being seen, and sometimes pride themselves on “disappearing” in the background. In other words, interpreters see themselves and are seen as non-persons – people present but treated as absent. They are expected not to contribute any substance to the current conversation.

The problem with the conduit model is that it allows interpreters to deny responsibility for any consequences of an interpreting event and may lead to unsuccessful interpreting events and unflattering perceptions by the primary parties. As Witter-Merithew (1986:12) explains, “interpreters denied responsibility for unsuccessful interpreted events and clients began to perceive interpreters as cold and self-serving.” Even if interpreters are willing to assume the responsibility and the clients are satisfied with the conduit view of the interpreters, it is still hard to remain uninvolved in real life situations. The complexity of the face-to-face interaction and the delicacy of cross-cultural issues, which will be elaborated in a more detailed way later in this paper, have prevented interpreters from standing completely aside the communication. For these reasons, practitioners and researchers began to search for a less radical description of the role of the interpreter.

### **2.3 Cultural mediator**

As the “machine” description began to fail, interpreters and interpreter educators turned to other academic arenas to find alternative views. Interdisciplinary studies were adopted in interpreting research. Researchers began to consider a theoretical



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